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ABSTRACT

The work of British playwright Sarah Daniels is some of the most politically provocative on the contemporary British stage. The uproar over Daniels' work comes not only because she argues for social change, but also because she offers models for building a new order. Two plays, with their comedy and their radical separatist politics, are representative of Daniels' feminist vision. The first play, "Ripen Our Darkness" (1981), demonstrates Daniels' use of anarchic narrative--non-male, non-linear--and her strategic use of the surreal. A fragment of the play's pre-production history is suggestive of both the threatening politics of the play and women's continuing battle to use the theater as their own political arena. The second play, "Byrthrite" (1987), shows Daniels' attention to sexuality and language. Samples of the play's negative critical reception fault its narration, its characterization, or its language, when actually, it appears to be its politics which offend. (Fourteen references are attached.) (SR)

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[Carlson, Susan]

Empowerment on Stage: Sarah Daniels' Agenda for Social Change

Susan Carlson

Sarah Daniels is one of the most politically provocative voices on the contemporary British stage. The work of this young writer (she is only 31) is still slight (it includes seven plays written in the last seven years), yet already she has become a pivotal figure in the politics of the British alternative theatre. There has been praise and support from feminists and women's groups, on the one hand, and puzzlement, outrage, and anger from the theatre establishment, on the other. My goal in this essay is to argue that the uproar over Daniels' work comes not only because Daniels argues for social change, but also because she offers models for building a new order. I have selected two plays to focus on: an early one, Ripen Our Darkness (1981) and the most recent one, Byrthrite (1987). Both are representative of Daniels' feminist vision with their comedy and their radical separatist politics.[1]

As I found out two years ago while interviewing women active in the British theatre, Daniels' Ripen Our Darkness has become exemplary of how women can succeed in theatre comedy. Philip Palmer, literary manager at the Royal Court (where four of Daniels' plays have been performed), even suggests that Daniels has been more of a model than Caryl Churchill for young writers. To those versed in feminist literature, a good share of this play will sound familiar. Central is the story of Mary, who is having an identity crisis over her roles as wife and mother. Attached to this focus on Mary are the concerns of Anna, Mary's daughter, and Julie, Anna's lover; of Daphne, a second middle-aged woman who, like Mary, is very unhappy; of Susan and Rene, mother and daughter, who are coping with their abusive father and husband; and of Tara, who details her unhappy marriage to a psychiatrist. The world which the men in the play control is clearly to blame for the anger and unhappiness these women endure. No one comes away from a Daniels' play with a doubt about

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the wholesale condemnation of the patriarchy. The important model for social protest Daniels provides comes not from such critique, however, but from her woman-centered response to the patriarchal world. The notable components of this response are the play's anarchic narrative and its strategic use of the surreal.

In Feminism and Theatre, Sue-Ellen Case argues that "contiguity" (129) is the best descriptor for the untraditional way in which women playwrights organize their plays. British actor/writer/director Lou Wakefield makes the more radical case that Daniels' "work is totally anarchic . . . it is a way of seeing the world which is not the male way (which is very ordered) . . . it is not linear." Daniels herself is aware of her provocative organization. When Anna tells her mother Mary--"'Reasonable' and 'man.' You can't have them together in the same sentence." (24)--Daniels is highlighting the problems with men's "normal," "reasonable" world and urging us to accept the non-linear connections of her world. This untraditional narrative, with its juxtapositions and monologues, invites our acceptance of this play's radical politics--lesbian relationships and a feminist afterlife.

Daniels' second main part of her new world is the creation of a surrealistic feminist afterlife. After twelve fairly realistic scenes, the main character Mary commits suicide to arrive, in Scene 13, in a heaven with a female deity. Director Carole Hayman describes the fantastic, comic mood of this scene as she first produced it: "The whole thing was a dance drama. These women danced around and they did silly things, and it was very funny. But it was a totally surreal moment in what was generally a naturalistic play." While Daniels had called for "a potentially quite difficult and possibly quite embarrassing scene" (Hayman), its successful original production proved how the risk could pay off. Audiences, although surprised by the sudden change, were responsive to the scene's feminist politics. As

Mary comes to consciousness in this environment, she finds herself in a woman-supportive world where the deity, her "Holy Hostess with the mostest" and her daughter "who bled in a shed for you," (35) thrive by debunking male institutions (the Bible is one "libelous load of crap" and marriage is another) and cracking jokes at men's expense. The deity says of men: "Men don't have eternal life. How could they? They have no souls. You must have noticed. They're all two-dimensional" (35). Mary's decision to remain in this paradise underscores the play's clear message that happiness lies only in such a new, comic order. And Daniels' decision to locate that order outside of conventional theatrical realities insists that we register how patriarchal the rest of the play has been. The non-real is Daniels' strongest call in this play for a post-patriarchal world.

I want to finish this look at Ripen Our Darkness by reporting a fragment of the play's pre-production history. The incredible lengths Daniels had to go through to get her play produced suggest both the threatening politics of her play and women's continuing battle to be able to use the theatre as their own political arena. Director Hayman remembers the initial reception of the play at the Royal Court, where it was finally produced: "All the men, and I include a lot of the ones who have worked with Caryl Churchill's work . . . said 'well, I don't know, well it is quite funny I suppose . . . but it is a terribly peculiar structure, isn't it? I mean, what is supposed to be important in it? I mean, who is the main character? It is just a series of scenes, isn't it? I mean where is the interval?" After eighteen months of multiple revision and many meetings at which the theatre's men worked to get Daniels to write the play their way, the play was put on at the Theatre Upstairs, although "even then it was policed every step of the way by one or another bloke hanging around it going 'oh, you made a mistake there' or 'oh,

this scene's wrong'" (Hayman). Hayman's summary of Daniels' theatre suggests why her plays are both so problematic for men and so promising for women:

> Sarah's plays are very funny, consequently they can't really be very serious, they can't really be about world issues, they can't really be important in any way. They are certainly not epics because we all know epics aren't funny. So you see there is this real misunderstanding about what you can get away with. What is so interesting about women writing theatre is that they are eroding all the time the frontiers of what you can get away with. I mean they are crossing taboo lines all the time in both content and structure.

Daniels' most recent play, Byrthrite, is more ambitious, more powerful, and thus more threatening than Ripen Our Darkness. The play takes place in seventeenth century Essex, where a group of young women has managed to create some less-than-sanctioned ways of convening themselves. Their subversive activities range from birthing support groups to nascent theatre companies to female soldiering. Under the tutelage of 70-year-old Grace, the women collect adventures, triumphs, and defeats. Although the contiguous action includes the oppression and even the death which result from the women's collisions with patriarchal institutions, the play vibrates with its female comedy. In fact, the women use laughter as one of their main weapons against men. During one scene, the women counter the official threats to have Grace found a witch by telling jokes. The plan works!

The women begin to claim their world by setting its joyous tone. They further define it through their attentions to sexuality and language. The play abounds with references to the uses and abuses of female bodies; we attend to anorexia, rape, wet nurses, menstruation, bleeding (as a medical cure), birth, mothering, and sex--heterosexual, lesbian, and gay. Concurrently, the play develops from Rose's self-abnegating comments--"I hate my body" (13)--to Grace's affirming pronouncement that women's power lies in claiming their bodies: "Our sex with its single power to give birth, pose a threat to men's power over whole order of villages, towns, counties and

countries. That control depends on women cur-tailing to men's ideals of how they should behave" (39). Ironically, however, most of the women in the play claim their bodily power not through mothering but through alliances and loves with other women. The clear message is that women can change what's wrong with the world only by depending on other women.

Daniels' revisioning of linguistic orders even more radically defines her new world in Byrthrite. There are as many references to language as to bodies in the play. Early comments on "tongues" carry with them both positive connotations of female assertiveness and negative connotations which equate talkative women with shrews. Other references are knowing indictments of male control of symbolic language. The power the women accumulate during the play is founded on their bodies, but refined through their reconstitutions of language. While Grace and Rose are unusual in their ability to read and write, all the women display linguistic acuity in their amateur etymology. Helen takes note of men's mistaking Eve for "a mispelling of evil (29), and Rose periodically deconstructs phrases which devalue women. The public displays of the women's linguistic power carry still more weight. As a Quaker preacher, Helen reaches crowds of women with a feminist rhetoric:

> The battle of men against men is not the war of our time but the fight women have had for their lives. We have shaken their opinion of us as the weaker sex . . . And they have responded with ways more forceful than ever before. Now is not the time for slowing down, for our lives swing more lightly in the balance than ever before. (37)

Finally, Rose's playwriting presents the most significant claim on language. Throughout the play, we attend to Rose's writing of her play and the women's plans to perform it. Daniels clearly ask us to connect Rose's revolutionary efforts with the play we are watching (the final exchange even hints that the play we are watching is Rose's). We know that in the twentieth century as in the seventeenth, putting women on stage as subjects is a subversive and revolutionary act.

At the end of the play its women have two specific plans for ensuring the lasting nature of the new world they have begun to define. Lady H's goal is to set up a school for midwives (35, 43), and Rose plans on "teaching girls to read and write" (43). From our twentieth century perspective we know that such plans are unfortunately premature in the seventeenth century. Yet Daniels has presented a clear model of how women can and must approach the changes they need to effect even today.

I would like to conclude by putting Daniels' work in the context of its critical reception. As Mary Remnant has pointed out, Daniels has borne the brunt the theatre establishment's criticism of women playwrights. According to reviewers, she is "man-hating," "fanatical," "raging," "wrathful," "vitriolic," "embittered," "bilious," "blasphemous," "obsessive," and "shrill" among other adjectives. The most alarming response I know of came from Robert Cushman, responding to Daniels' play Masterpieces (1983). He shows in the extreme how those who have felt threatened by Daniels' "aggressive" theatre have responded by refusing to credit her feminism:

> The actresses . . . are far better before their consciousnesses have been raised than after, when they have to deliver all their lines through clenched teeth. Miss Love has an uproarious speech about contraception, and I spent one whole scene happily admiring Miss Pogson's legs. I mention this only to suggest what a very tricky arena the theatre is for the discussion of sexism. One of the occupational hazards of my job is falling in love four times a week.

What this extreme response shows all too clearly is how reviewers--mostly male reviewers--have refused to take the plays on their own terms. The reviewers criticize one thing when they are actually concerned about another. They state that it is the narration, the characterization, or the language which is at fault when it appears, actually, to be the politics. Consider one final response from Michael Billington. While appearing to support Daniels' agenda for social change, he effectively questions its whole approach:

> I believe that the first task of a polemical dramatist is to engage with the enemy: to present the triumph of a point of view through

> confrontation and argument. But Sarah Daniels' Neaptide, which won her the 1982 George Devine award and now gets its premiere at the Cottesloe, champions lesbian rights and the principle of maternal child custody while rubbishing the opposition. This may be good sexual politics but it makes for decidedly slanted, unexploratory drama . . . it is precisely because I believe Ms. Daniels . . . has talent that I wish she would accept that a cause triumphs only when it has worthy opponents.

I refer to all this rather depressing critical response because it actually reinforces what I have said above. I take the energy that has gone into denouncing Daniels' work as a measure of the threatening nature of that work. Daniels' creation of theatrical worlds which are built on female structures, female sexuality, and female language probably should not please all theatre reviewers. (We would be very suspicious if they did!) As a writer who effectively challenges the male order, Daniels is important. As a writer who offers hope and plans for the future, she is invaluable.

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Notes

[1]See both Sue-Ellen Case and Michelene Wandor who make the same general argument that the theatre is and should be the site of sexual politics since it has great potential for change.

It is interesting to note that John Bull, in New British Political Dramatists, barely mentions women writers and their contributions to the politics of fringe theatre.

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